

Premature Return of Peace Corps Volunteers

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CONCERN for the individual volunteer, even as his number increases, remains one of the outstanding characteristics of the Peace Corps. The extensive participation of the mental health and public health professions in the selection, training, and overseas psychological support of the volunteer reflects this concern and may have helped to keep the rate of premature return as low as it is.

To describe the care with which volunteers are finally chosen from the large pool of applicants would require a paper in itself, and we refer the interested reader to Hobbs (1). Suffice it to say that applicants are carefully screened and matched to the requirements of their proposed project. They are then invited to the training site for an intensive 8- to 12-week course in which the trainees are tested, interviewed, and observed in their performance and interactions. A psychiatrist meets with them in a series of five small informal, anticipatory guidance sessions, and more formally whenever indicated. They are evaluated medically to be

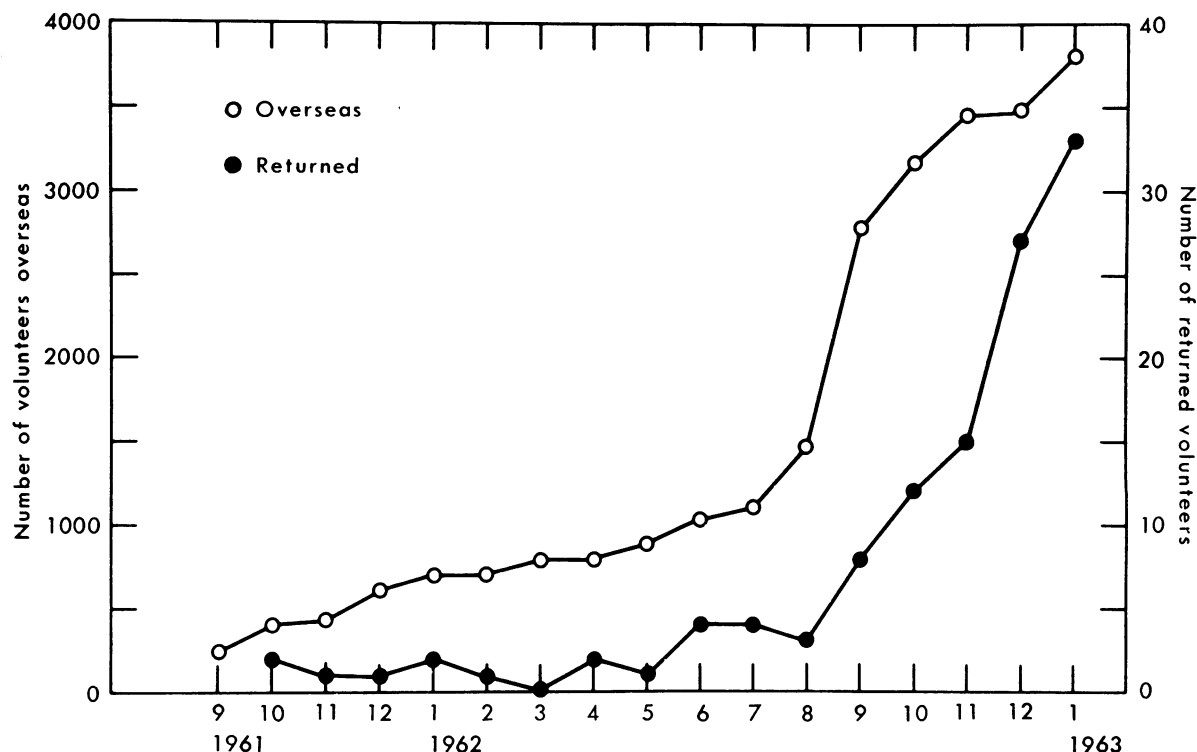
certain they can meet the physical demands of the project. Those who successfully complete this arduous training phase become the Peace Corps volunteers. [For a description of the development of the program for preventive psychiatry in the Peace Corps, see Leopold and Duhl (2, 3) and Kramer and Frank (4). A manual for psychiatric consultants including suggestions for the anticipatory guidance sessions was prepared by Caplan (5) and published by the Peace Corps.]

During the 17-month period ending January 1963 covered in this report, the Peace Corps placed 3,805 volunteers in 43 countries. Of this number only 116 returned home from 28 countries. This represents 3 percent of the volunteers in the field at the end of that period. However, if we correct for the differences in time abroad, the rate has been nearly constant at 54 returning volunteers per 1,000 man-years of overseas service, or 5.4 percent per annum. Adding all the volunteers overseas during each month gives the total number of man-months, which divided by 12 converts to the number of man-years. Although some volunteers have been abroad for the full 17 months, more than half have been there only 5 months. The total number of man-years of experience was 2,152.3 during this period. The number of volunteers returning each month for all reasons has varied from none to as many as one a day in January 1963. However, with some lag this number has been roughly proportional to the total number of volunteers sent overseas, with a slight rise during the last 2 months (fig. 1).

The following observations may be made on the basis of data accumulated after a careful

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Figure 1. Number of Peace Corps volunteers returning each month, all causes



examination of all the records available and from individual interviews of returning volunteers, nearly all of whom have been brought to Washington, D.C., for this purpose.

Observations

Age and sex. Most returnees are in the age group 21 to 25, the peak age group of all the volunteers overseas (table 1). We find that the total rate of return for women is slightly higher,

59 as compared with 51 per 1,000 man-years for men. However, if we compare the number of male returnees 25 years of age and under with those over 25, we discover that the older men are twice as apt to come home early. (This is significant by chi-square at the 0.1 level.) The women seem to come home more often after 30, too, but here the numbers are too small to indicate more than a trend.

Marital status. Thirteen percent of all Peace

Table 1. Age and sex distribution of Peace Corps volunteers returning from overseas

Age (years)	Males			Females			Total		
	Returns	Overseas	Percent	Returns	Overseas	Percent	Returns	Overseas	Percent
<20.....	2	207	0.96	1	111	0.90	3	318	0.94
21-25.....	40	1,600	2.50	33	1,009	3.27	73	2,609	2.79
26-30.....	15	375	4.00	2	178	1.12	17	553	3.07
31-40.....	9	113	7.96	3	74	4.05	12	187	6.41
41-50.....	2	32	6.25	3	29	10.34	5	61	8.19
51-60.....	2	8	25.00	1	34	2.94	3	42	7.14
61-70.....	0	8	0	3	25	12.00	3	33	9.09
71-80.....	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	2	0
Total.....	70	2,344	2.98	46	1,461	3.14	116	3,805	3.04

Corps volunteers are married. One might expect married volunteers to be more stable overseas, but they come home as often as their single counterparts. Thirteen of the 116 returnees were married. The 13 included 6 married couples and 1 who separated from his volunteer wife overseas by mutual agreement. Six of these volunteers were forced to return because of a medical problem or pregnancy in the spouse.

Time overseas. There are points in the period of time overseas when a volunteer is more apt to return (fig. 2, table 2). The graph and table suggest that premature return is more likely after 4, 7, 12, and 15 of the 16 months under observation, but the numbers are too small as yet to make a significant difference. There are qualitative differences, however, between those who return early and those who return after several months, which will be discussed later in this paper.

Educational level. Possession of a college degree is thus far an insignificant variable. Seventy-four percent of all volunteers hold baccalaureate or advanced degrees, but so do 68 percent of all those who return prematurely.

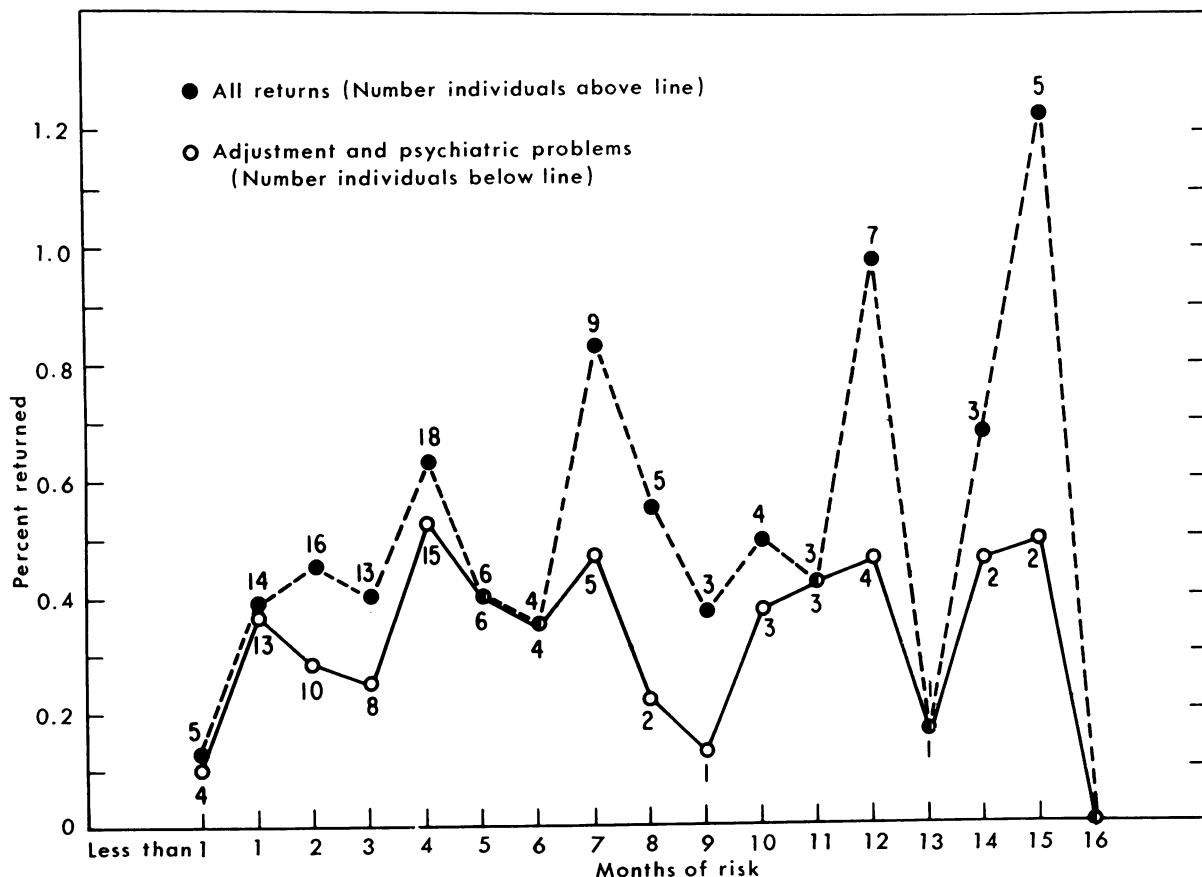
Reasons for Return

The volunteers have been classified in one of four categories, according to their reasons for returning (table 3): compassion, failure to adjust, medical reasons, and death of the volunteer.

Compassion. Twenty-one volunteers returned because of family or personal problems beyond their control and unrelated to their Peace Corps responsibilities.

Failure to adjust. Since the other categories seemed less predictable, we concentrated on the 71 labeled failures to adjust, first lumped together as a group and later divided by region. Here we found that the group began to return

Figure 2. Return rate of Peace Corps volunteers, by number of months overseas



early during the first and fourth months overseas. From our interviews it appeared that we could divide the group further into four subgroups.

1. Motivation: Included under motivation were 19 persons whose initial reason for going overseas was to escape a threatening involvement at home, to avoid responsibility, or to seek personal gain. There were some who were clearly not interested in staying once they had arrived. Two examples follow:

A 20-year-old girl entered training on the insistence of her fiancé, who had just completed training. He

hoped to have her join the project, where they could marry. She reluctantly left her job and went into training, where she became increasingly disenchanted with him. She broke the engagement after arriving in the country, and after 6 unhappy months she decided to resign.

A 30-year-old man left his widowed mother and fiancée of 3 years but found overseas that he would prefer to marry the girl after all. He came home after only 4 months abroad. It is notable that he had been considered "one of the strongest volunteers" in training.

2. Personal adjustment: The next group of 32 came home for a conglomerate of social and adaptational reasons. Careful examination of

Table 2. Rate of return of Peace Corps volunteers, by months of exposure overseas, based on number at risk during each period ¹

Months at risk	Adjustment and psychiatric returns	Percent	All returns	Percent
<1	4÷(3,805+83)	0.10	5÷(3,805+116)	0.13
1	13÷(3,488+79)	.36	14÷(3,488+111)	.39
2	10÷(3,458+66)	.28	16÷(3,458+97)	.45
3	8÷(3,160+56)	.25	13÷(3,160+81)	.40
4	15÷(2,783+48)	.53	18÷(2,783+68)	.63
5	6÷(1,473+33)	.40	6÷(1,473+50)	.39
6	4÷(1,108+27)	.35	4÷(1,108+44)	.35
7	5÷(1,044+23)	.47	9÷(1,044+40)	.83
8	2÷(880+18)	.22	5÷(880+31)	.55
9	1÷(783+16)	.13	3÷(783+26)	.37
10	3÷(782+15)	.38	4÷(782+23)	.50
11	3÷(697+12)	.42	3÷(697+19)	.42
12	4÷(698+9)	.57	7÷(698+16)	.98
13	1÷(614+5)	.16	1÷(614+9)	.16
14	2÷(431+4)	.46	3÷(431+8)	.68
15	2÷(401+2)	.50	5÷(401+5)	1.23
16	0÷(245)	0	0÷(245)	0

¹ The return rate for each period at risk is based on the number overseas during each period of months. For example, to find all those who might have come home after 4 months, we considered all volunteers overseas through September 1962, 4 months before the end of the study. All those volunteers who returned after 4 months or more are added since they would not have been included in the September total but would have been at risk; that is, $18 \div (2,783 + 68) = 0.63$ percent.

Table 3. Peace Corps volunteer returns, by reasons and number of months overseas

Reason	Months															
	<1	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
Compassionate	1	1	3	4	2			1	1	2			3		1	2
Adjustment	2	13	8	6	12	5	4	5	2	1	3	3	2	1	2	2
Motivation	2	5	1	1	4	2	2				2					
Personal adjustment		6	5	1	2	3	2	4	2	1		1	1		1	2
Job dissatisfaction		2		2	3			1								
Marriage			2	2	3						1	2	1	1	1	
Medical	2		5	3	4	1		1			1		2			1
Psychiatric	2		2	2	3	1							2			
Death								2	2							
Total	5	14	16	13	18	6	4	9	5	3	4	3	7	1	3	5

this group could result in further subclassification, but the boundaries are somewhat artificial. Six had problems with the host country nationals. Five had some conflict with Peace Corps authority, and two with fellow volunteers. Seventeen had individual failure in adapting: nine were too rigid and inflexible, three were too passive, three had a weakness for alcohol, and two had trouble in their marriage.

Several times a returned volunteer would complain that he could not tolerate the other volunteers who seemed less idealistic or zealous than he. Thus he often effectively isolated himself from the potential support of his fellows and became increasingly lonely and depressed. Such a person is usually a rigid, driven, obsessional character, with little flexibility under stress.

3. Job dissatisfaction: An interesting corollary may be found in the nine who left primarily because they were unhappy with the assignment. Often they seemed to be well-meaning people who had had considerable success in the past in an area such as 4-H Club work. Two such volunteers found a number of restrictions in the range of their activities. Stifled initially,

they made a few desultory gestures in other directions but soon gave up and resigned in exasperation. They placed a high value on industriousness but had less patience or interest in learning more about the people and how they might build a more useful and contributing role for themselves.

4. Marriage: The group who return or who are separated overseas for marriage are those who decide to marry overseas and whose new commitment interferes with the demands of Peace Corps service. For many, this may represent a healthy resolution of a psychosocial moratorium, but this group of 13 is included under the adjustment category when marriage precludes fulfillment of the original contract.

Medical reasons. This group includes both organic illnesses and severe emotional disturbances. For an account of general morbidity among the volunteers, the reader is referred to Spence and associates (6).

Eight volunteers returned for diverse physical illnesses or injuries. The illnesses were a mild cerebrovascular accident, Hodgkin's disease, peptic ulcer, intestinal polyp, transient hematuria of undetermined etiology, and stress

Table 4. Breakdown of adjustment and psychiatric problems of returning Peace Corps volunteers

Reason	Total	Average age	Male	Female	Marital status		College graduate	
					Single	Married	Number	Percent
Total overseas	3, 805	25	2, 344	1, 461	3, 307	498	2, 816	74
Motivation	19	27	12	7	18	1	11	58
Personal adjustment	32	29	23	9	30	2	19	59
Job dissatisfaction	9	31	7	2	6	3	6	67
Marriage	13	23	2	11	0	0	10	77
Psychiatric	12	26	6	6	12	0	9	75
	Job relatedness		Average first assessment rating ¹	Average selection rating ²	Average psychiatric rating ¹	Psychiatrically interviewed		
	Number	Percent				Number	Percent	
Total overseas				(³)				
Motivation	15/19	79	3. 9	4. 6	3. 3	6/19	32	
Personal adjustment	27/32	84	3. 8	4. 9	3. 6	12/32	38	
Job dissatisfaction	5/9	56	4. 0	5. 0	3. 5	2/7	29	
Marriage	9/12	75	4. 0	4. 8	3. 5	6/13	46	
Psychiatric	11/12	92	3. 4	4. 7	3. 0	3/12	25	

¹ Volunteers are rated: 1, unsatisfactory; 2, marginal; 3, good; 4, very good; 5, excellent.

² Volunteers are rated: 1, unqualified; 2, marginal; 3, qualified but not suitable for project; 4, acceptable; 5, very good; 6, excellent.

³ Not examined.

incontinence in an older woman. The two accidents resulted from falls: one man received multiple injuries and one older woman, a broken arm.

Psychiatric considerations accounted for 12 of the 20 (60 percent) who returned for medical reasons. Four of the 12 had transient situational reactions, including one reaction of the acute schizo-affective type. All promptly recovered after returning to the United States. Six had serious depressions. One boy with schizoid tendencies developed an acute anxiety reaction, and one anxious young woman developed an incapacitating phobia.

Preventive psychiatry begins by training future volunteers to discuss openly their reactions to the pressures of the rigorous and demanding program and their uncertainties about future assignments. It must be remembered that those finally sent overseas form a highly selected group who have withstood the demands of an intensive 8- to 12-week training period. The adjustment problems that occur may be viewed as situational reactions to stresses in the overseas situation which overextend the coping mechanisms of certain people. Psychiatric diagnoses, in turn, represent only one end of the adjustment continuum (7-9).

Death. Two volunteers died in a plane crash in Colombia, one died in an automobile accident in Brazil, and one died of amebic hepatitis in the Philippines.

Analysis

A closer examination of the adjustment and psychiatric problems reveals that the poorly motivated group, at 27 years of age, are close

to the mean Peace Corps age of 25 but are least educated (table 4). Only 58 percent have finished college compared with the Peace Corps average of 74 percent college graduates. Those with personal adjustment problems tend to be older (29 years of age) and again less educated. Those classed as dissatisfied with their jobs are strikingly older (31 years of age) and show a low correlation indeed (56 percent) between previously demonstrated skills and their Peace Corps assignments. Those who leave in order to marry are usually young women, most of whom have already finished college.

Those who returned for psychiatric reasons at 26 years of age were near the mean age of 25, were equally split between men and women, and all were single. They were well educated and remarkably well suited for their assignment on the basis of their previously demonstrated skills (92 percent correlation). However, their first assessment ratings, based largely on their past work histories and references, were the lowest of this group, as were the psychiatric ratings when available. All were not interviewed by a psychiatrist during training because they adapted well to that academic setting and gave no indication of any potential difficulties.

Regional Differences

The Peace Corps is not evenly distributed around the world. The volunteers vary from region to region in total number, length of time they have been abroad, their average age, their sex ratio, and the percentage who have completed college (table 5).

The rate of return from the four major geo-

Table 5. Total Peace Corps volunteers overseas, by region

Region	Total	Total regional man-years	Average age	Sex		College graduates	
				Male	Female	Number	Percent
Africa.....	1, 242	689	25	802	440	1, 103	89
Far East.....	904	604	25	466	438	712	79
Latin America.....	1, 214	619	26	758	456	703	58
Near East and South Asia.....	445	240	26	318	127	298	67
Total.....	3, 805	2, 152	25	2, 344	1, 461	2, 816	74

graphic regions also differs markedly. Africa and the Far East have close to the total rate of 54 per 1,000 man-years, but in Latin America the rate is 50 percent higher (significant by chi-square at the 0.01 level). This differential is reflected to some extent in all four major categories (table 6). If we focus for a moment on the adjustment, we see that the rate in Latin America is especially high for the poorly motivated and those who are dissatisfied with their assignments, but it is also higher for those who have difficulties in personal adjustment.

The increased rate of return from Latin America led us to examine the adjustment failures there in more detail (table 7). In addition to the larger number returning, we noted that the returnees are older (29 years of age) than the average volunteer (25 years of age) and older than those adjustment returnees from

other regions. Despite their age they have less formal education; only 59 percent have graduated from college. This is generally true for all Latin American volunteers. If one compares their previously learned or demonstrated skills to their present assignments, only three of four correlate as compared with correlation in the Far East at 95 percent or in Africa at 82 percent.

Discussion

Examination of the returnees from Latin America reveals an older, less educated volunteer, with a job less often related to his previous skills. This matches to some degree the actual demands in South America, where many Peace Corps volunteers are assigned to work in rural or urban community development, the most difficult, perhaps, of all the areas of Peace Corps assignments because precedent or formal struc-

Table 6. Type, number, and rate of Peace Corps volunteer returns, by region, September 1961-January 1963

Reason	Total	Africa N=28 R=41 ¹			Far East N=29 R=48 ¹			Latin America N=53 R=85 ¹			Near East, South Asia N=6 R=25 ¹		
		Male	Fe- male	Rate	Male	Fe- male	Rate	Male	Fe- male	Rate	Male	Fe- male	Rate
Compassionate.....	21	4	4	1	2	3	8	7	0	11	0	1	4
Adjustment.....	71	11	7	26	6	10	27	22	11	53	3	1	17
Motivation.....		3	0	4	1	1	3	7	5	19	1	1	8
Personal adjustments.....		6	3	13	4	4	13	10	2	19	2	0	8
Job dissatisfaction.....		2	0	3	1	1	3	4	1	8	0	0	0
Marriage.....		0	4	6	0	4	7	1	3	6	0	0	0
Medical.....	20	1	1	3	4	3	12	5	5	16	1	0	4
Psychiatric.....		0	1	1	3	2	8	3	3	10	0	0	4
Death.....	4	0	0	0	1	0	2	3	0	5	0	0	0
Total.....	116	16	12	-----	13	16	-----	37	16	-----	4	2	-----

¹ Return rate per 1,000 man-years.

Table 7. Examination of adjustment reasons for returning Peace Corps volunteers, by region

Region	Total	Rate per 1,000 man- years	Average age	Sex		College graduates		Job matches previous skills	
				Male	Female	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Africa.....	17	41	27	11	6	12	71	14	82
Far East.....	21	48	22	9	12	17	81	20	95
Latin America.....	39	85	29	25	14	23	59	29	74
Near East and South Asia.....	4	25	28	3	1	2	50	3	75

ture are lacking. (Volunteers who resign may have to pay their own fare home. This would, of course, make it much easier to leave from Latin America. Proximity alone would seem an attractive but unlikely reason for this difference in rates.)

Our experience interviewing returned volunteers suggests that there are two general personality types who have little success in the area of community development: the overly passive and the rigid and inflexible.

The passive person, often one who can succeed admirably in a structured setting, may find himself lost in a community development project. He simply may not have the capacity to be assertive enough to approach people, talk with them, and learn their needs in order to help initiate new projects such as the building of aqueducts or schools. However, such a person might succeed admirably in teaching school, where the students come to him. Some have even stated as much, saying they would have preferred a teaching assignment.

The rigid, uncompromising person may not be able to adapt to a culture with a different value system. For example, as a matter of courtesy in parts of Latin America, it may be important to agree to a meeting to avoid being offensive, without any real intention of arriving at the appointed time. The unbending character, familiar and often successful in his own country, may be most unhappy and ineffectual if he cannot learn to tolerate the frustrations that accompany a more leisurely way of life.

In a paper such as this concentrating on the individual returning volunteer, the more general considerations of policy, programing, training, selection, field support, and host-country acceptance are not and cannot be directly scrutinized, although all obviously play a profound part in the preparation and maintenance of the Peace Corps volunteer at his post.

If 116 persons have returned from only 28 of the 43 countries, why the disparity? Why are some of the earliest projects still without dropouts? The relatively unstructured community development projects seem to be a more frequent source of returns, but the assignment alone cannot be the whole answer.

Some Peace Corps representatives and physicians are extraordinarily supportive and pa-

tient with adjustment problems. Others may prefer to keep only the volunteers who appear to be the sturdiest by their quiet acceptance of any difficulties they might encounter or by their obvious capacity to cope. Each leader measures success in his own way in accordance with the strong Peace Corps emphasis on local autonomy. There is no doubt, however, that different approaches to returning marginal volunteers (those performing at borderline of acceptance) significantly affect the figures we present.

Aside from the kind of personality that may be effective in doing the Peace Corps job overseas, another important consideration is what kinds of intervention by overseas staff may be effective in reducing the number of volunteers returning prematurely. Studies of the adjustment of Peace Corps volunteers in Colombia indicate that the first few weeks after arrival in the host country are punctuated by high levels of anxiety. This is the first of two periods of psychological stress described by nearly all the volunteers interviewed. The second period occurred between 3 and 5 months and was marked by symptoms of depression. This is understandable, since it is the time when all the difficulties of field adjustment press in on the volunteer and when he first realizes that his early unrealistic expectations of rapid results are not going to materialize.

The customary incountry training, usually of several weeks' duration, is described by volunteers as heightening their symptoms of anxiety during the first month after arrival in the host country. It is their recommendation that this period of incountry training be shortened. They explain that they have already been through 8 to 12 weeks of U.S. training just before arriving in the field. In some instances this has been supplemented by further training at an outward-bound camp. On arrival they are anxious to get to their site. The further delay of incountry training only increases their impatience and anxiety. They prefer a brief incountry orientation of just a few days. Then after about 3 months of actual fieldwork, volunteers prefer to regroup for a regional meeting with the staff concerned.

It is our recommendation that intervention of the staff through a conference at this time would permit the volunteers to exchange with

each other the initial problems of their work-site and gain support from each other and from the staff. This also facilitates staff contact with them in an economical way. It supplements individual site visits by the staff, which are becoming more and more difficult early in the life of the project as the programs grow larger. It would appear that the first few months may be the critical ones. If the proper kind of relationship develops between the staff and the volunteer during this period, its good effects will be felt for the duration of the project. The intervention of the staff by such a regional conference during the critical 3- to 5-month period would appear to be an excellent way to achieve this goal.

Finally, it is important to remember that the relatively low rate of returning volunteers gives the Peace Corps an enviable record. Although the experience we are gaining may help us to reduce this premature return rate somewhat, ever-increasing standards of performance in the field will always necessitate the return of some volunteers. This is as it should be. Every volunteer knows that he must revoluteer every day and that his evaluation is not complete until his 2-year tour ends.

Summary

Analysis of the reasons for the premature return of 116 Peace Corps volunteers from a total of 3,805 during the first 17 months of experience overseas reveals a few general facts. The overall rate of return is only 54 per 1,000 man-years or 5.4 percent per annum. Men over 25 are a significantly higher risk group, twice as apt to return as their younger comrades. The return rate from Latin America is 50 per-

cent greater than the mean return for the Peace Corps. Closer examination of the volunteers who return because of adjustment problems reveals a group who are older and more often assigned to work at unfamiliar tasks.

Shortened incountry training and regional conferences of volunteers, to be held between 3 and 5 months after arrival in the host country, are recommended. The first few months overseas are the critical period for the development of a supportive relationship between overseas staff and the volunteer.

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